



Smart Practice

strategies & tips

“Practice makes perfect.” One of the most common proverbs in the English language and, if you were to ask a whole bunch of music students, probably one of the most infuriating.

Exactly *what kind* of practice makes you play perfectly? What’s the secret? How do you make the time that you put in *really* count?

Of course, there is no secret. All you need are some effective techniques supported by a good combination of inspiration, determination and self-discipline. That’s why we’ve put together this easy-to-use guide—because it really isn’t that complicated!

The advice and techniques in this eBook aim to guide you toward faster progress in less time, no matter which instrument you play. The more effective your practice techniques, the more rapidly you’ll progress. Start now and you’ll be playing like a pro in no time.

10 strategies for a winning approach to practice

1. Get inspired.

Probably the single most important requirement for effective practising. Why are you doing this? You know the reason, and you'll need to feed that passion. Surround yourself with inspiration, whether that be a poster of Carlos Santana soloing at Wembley Stadium or 5,342 hours of the world's best symphonies on your ipod. How do you want to sound? Immerse yourself in that. Get a recorded version of a piece you want to play well and listen to it in your car, while you're cooking or when you're in the bath. Watch other artists playing that same piece on YouTube. Go to live concerts. Make sure that every day you surround yourself with the sights and sounds you need to fuel your dreams. And make sure you're playing the music that *you* like! If you're not feeling truly passionate about what you're doing, rest assured this eBook won't help you and practice will be torture. You'll need ten times the tenacity if you're not inspired.

2. Create a space.

If you need to clear the room, rearrange furniture and get your guitar down from the awkward overhead cupboard every time you're ready to practice, chances are your enthusiasm won't last long. Remove as many barriers as possible by making sure you have a comfortable, private space to practice in, where your gear is already set up.

3. Choose the right time to practice.

If you're going to create good practicing habits, you need to be honest with yourself from the start. Do you really feel like practicing late at night? Is 7am on a Sunday morning a time you could stick to? Make sure that your designated practice time is well chosen. Planning practice by the clock seems like the sensible way to go, but

that's not necessarily the case. You'll be frustrated if you're late starting and, if you're watching the clock, you could be tempted to end the session "on time" rather than when you feel it's complete. The best time to practise is when you get home from your lesson and the work is fresh in your mind. There's no better time to cement all the good work you've just done.

4. Schedule your practice around daily activities.

Arrange your practice time after something else, such as half an hour after you come home from school or work, or 15 minutes after the kids are in bed. If you plan to practice first thing in the morning but don't have a regular wake time, decide to practice either 30 minutes after you get up or as soon as you finish breakfast. By planning practice around everyday events instead of strict times, you'll find it much easier to stick to the schedule you've created.

5. Decide.

Have you consciously decided to be the best musician you can be, regardless of the time, patience and determination it may require? Decide, and you've handled some of the top practice killers: self-doubt, limiting beliefs and negative attitudes, straight away. Granted, there's a bit of practice to do to make it happen, but if you've already decided, you've made life ten times easier from the word 'go'.

6. Stick to the plan and make it a habit.

The idea is to make practicing a regular part of your life. If you have some consistency in your practice schedule—say, straight after dinner, three nights a week—you'll soon be moving from mealtime to practice without a second thought. By making a habit of practicing, you'll find it much easier than having to give yourself a pep talk all the time. A few minutes of planning each week will save you countless hours of needless practice over a few months. You'll find that you're actually making more progress in less time, which definitely makes all that planning worth it!

7. Set specific practice goals.

Know what you want to achieve each session and write it down. You need the big picture (i.e. I want to play flute in an orchestra at the Sydney Opera House) but you also need weekly targets you can meet. A general intention to “go over some Beethoven” won’t really get you far. What you need is a very precise target so that you’ll know if you’ve achieved it or not. So, instead of a vague plan, your goal might be more like: Play through the first 16 bars of the Beethoven five times in a row with no errors. With a very specific goal to achieve, you’ll know when it’s time to move on to the next target, or finish your practice if you’ve achieved all that you set out to.

8. Divide up your workload.

Once you know what you want to achieve in a week, you’ll need to spread that over the number of sessions you have available. Know your targets for each session so that when you hit each target, you can move on. At first it may take you a little while to conquer those challenges but by practicing effectively, you’ll soon be ticking off the boxes in less time.

9. Get past the finishing posts.

Don’t make the mistake of leaving yourself no time to go over the piece in its entirety. There are challenges that lie in wait once you put it all back together. Usually these are to do with remembering the whole piece and how the segments fit together, or sometimes it’s the actual transition from one segment to the next that poses challenges. Only when you can play the whole piece, almost all of the time without errors, have you mastered it. Practice must include going over the entire piece or else you’ve pulled up a few yards short of the finishing posts. Don’t feel downhearted if, when you play the entire piece, you make mistakes in segments you weren’t having problems with in isolation. To quote Wolfgang Kohler: ‘The whole is greater than the sum of its parts’.

10. Enjoy your practice.

Make your practice time a time of relaxation and renewal in your day. You're practising something you're passionate about and you should feel good when you practise. This means that you need to go easy on yourself and don't worry too much about mistakes or even about getting it right. This may sound odd, but it's more important to enjoy your practice than to get everything right. Students who enjoy their practice and do everything wrong will never give up, and will ultimately conquer everything they set their sights on. Students who get everything right but put themselves under so much pressure that they wear themselves out in the process will eventually give up because they'll associate the instrument with stress. The less pressure you put yourself under, the more you'll remember everything, progress, enjoy yourself and look forward to practising again the next day. All the discipline and tenacity in the world cannot compete with excitement and enthusiasm! If there were one single secret to practice it would be "enjoy it".

18 tips for effective and time-efficient practice

1. Warm up with a series of scales or other warm up exercises.

Just like a professional athlete, you'll need to warm up a little to get in The Zone. It's not easy to jump straight into *Moonlight Sonata* when you've been in peak hour traffic for 45 minutes. There are books you can buy for your specific instrument that contain suggested warm ups and scales.

2. Note your mistakes.

Initially, play the piece once and write down any mistakes. You'll need to be conscious of your mistakes so you can go back and correct them. You can also do this for scales, an exercise or various other techniques. At this stage, you want to be fussy. Begin slowly and listen for mistakes.

3. Aim to get *all* of the notes correct, *all* of the time.

Our brains are amazing instruments and particularly good at learning patterns. When your piece of music—or pattern—has a wrong note in it, your brain will remember it. Then, when you play it correctly, your brain has to unlearn the incorrect pattern as well as learn the new one. It's more difficult for your brain to remember the correct pattern if you're feeding it incorrect patterns all the time! It's better to not play at all than to play the wrong notes, so to make the most progress, make sure you get the notes spot on. Having said that... do so without getting too intense about it and breaking the 'enjoy your practice' rule.

4. Play slowly.

Seems like a no-brainer, but this is one of the most powerful pieces of advice to follow if you want to become an accomplished musician. Play. Slowly. When. Practising. Most people start to speed up when they feel confident and this can be when mistakes are made—and repeated. Resist the urge to speed up. Use a metronome if you need to. And if there's anything you're unsure of, stop, sort it out, and continue practising the piece correctly.

5. Understand the 'Tipping Point' principle.

Practice normally consists of repeating different sequences of music, rhythms or skills over and over in an attempt to reach the point at which you can perform the sequence perfectly, the first time you try. We are capable of incredible, intense concentration on a given sequence or repetition, but only for only a short period of time—usually ten to fifteen minutes. You'll notice during each given burst of concentration that you tend to improve on an upwards curve, then suddenly lose the clarity you had gained and are unable to get back to your best. This is because you've reached the tipping point. It's simply that your powers of concentration for that repetition are spent and your mind needs time off to quietly organise all the information it just acquired. This doesn't mean that you have to stop your practice session, just that you need to move to another sequence or repetition that's different enough from the one you just did, to provide your mind with a 'fresh' feeling. Of

course, if you master a sequence you'll normally avoid the tipping point as the concentration is not as intense.

6. Work with the 'Tipping Point' principle.

How do you use the tipping point principle to your advantage? Firstly, recognise when you've gone beyond the tipping point on any particular repetition and move on to something else. This may be a challenge if you're a perfectionist because you really want to get it right... but it'll save you frustration and wasted energy in the long run. Second, aim to practise right up to, but not beyond the tipping point, as all that can be gained from going beyond it are bad habits. Third, see reaching the tipping point as a success; you've done all you can do on that skill for the moment... well done. It doesn't matter if you went downhill in the last minute or so.

7. If it's hard, split it up.

If a section of a piece is tripping you up and you can't get your head (or fingers) around it, break it down into its parts, master the parts, then put them back together. Attempting to overcome the whole sequence by sheer endurance is a recipe for disaster and bad habits. For example, if you wish to strum *Knockin' on Heaven's Door* at your next barbecue but it's all a bit much, isolate the chords and isolate the strum. Mute the guitar and just work on the strumming pattern without chords. When you've cracked that turn your attention to the chords. Go through the chord sequence by strumming once on each chord in order to speed up the chord changes and burn that chord progression into your mind. Now simply do one of the strumming patterns on each chord and... "A knock knock knockin' on..." you're away! An example for piano would be isolating the left and right hand parts and mastering those before attempting them together. Another example of this would be playing a very fast section of music on the flute. If the speed together with a complex sequence of notes is too much, practise the technique for speed by picking three or four notes and moving between them at the required speed, and practise the actual sequence of notes slowly until perfected. Now put them back together and 'hey presto!'

8. Observe. Diagnose. Isolate.

While you're playing it's important to observe yourself and listen to the overall sound even while you're immersed in the particulars of a skill or sequence. This is actually an ability in itself. Splitting your attention in this way is a fail-safe way to avoid bad habit creation. Sometimes you'll be certain that you're performing a given skill just as it appears on the page... but the part of you that's listening to the music as a whole says something's 'not quite right'. Listen to that part and take a step back from the page. Nine times out of ten you'll find you were missing something, or more probably, misinterpreting something. This observation is also the start of training your ear. Remember, if your ear says it doesn't sound right... something's amiss. Part two, diagnose. So through observing you've noticed that something's not right... now comes the question: What is it? If you repeat the sequence over and over while putting more of your attention on the observation, rather than the technical side of the sequence, you'll be able to pick out the problem. Once diagnosis is complete, isolate the part that was wrong and go over it as many times as you need to master it. Now master the original sequence with the 'problem part' re-inserted. Your ear should issue a sigh of satisfaction when the music's sitting just right.

9. Sleep.

OK so the fact that we need sleep to survive helps with the long-term commitment to this tip... but it's true, sleep really does help! It won't take long for you to notice that a good practice session, where the tipping point is reached on several skills + a good sleep = a new level of mental and physical clarity on the skills. Why even point out a tip that everyone does anyway? So you can relax if you haven't mastered a skill during practice and know that you'll literally be working on it in your sleep.

10. Narrow it down.

Once you're familiar with the piece, narrow your focus down to the areas that need work. Instead of starting at the beginning and playing until you reach the tricky spots, begin with those areas. Then go back and play the whole piece again once you've fixed the challenging parts.

11. Wrong notes don't count.

Say you want to practise a piece of music. You play it a few times and get it wrong a few times. Then you start to fix your mistakes, one by one. Finally you play the piece perfectly! Time to move on, right? Wrong. *Now* is when your practicing starts. All of those times you played the wrong notes don't count because that's not what you want your brain to remember. Imagine this is your pattern over five days of practice. If you play the piece six times before you get it right, you'll be playing it incorrectly 30 times and correctly only five times!

12. Review. Review. Review.

It might feel like a waste of time but regularly reviewing what you have already learned will help you progress faster. Create a habit of reviewing everything you have practised during a session at the end of that session. Also review what you've been learning at the start of a session. You can think of reviewing as an investment in your future success! The repetition makes your brain learn faster and you'll soon be seeing greater progress in less time.

13. Take your time.

When reviewing what you've learned, play everything through once, a little slower than during your practice to make sure you hit every note correctly.

14. Once you've mastered 'slow', go faster.

Start by going a little faster than your original tempo, then increase the tempo until you're at the tempo you'd play if you were performing live. Old problems may come back or new ones appear. Correct them as noted earlier.

15. Correct more than your mistakes.

Because our brains are already ahead of what we're actually doing, to correct a mistake properly you'll need to go back a few notes (or more!) and revise from there. Ideally, play the whole section correctly more than ten times. If you only fix the incorrect note, you're simply reinforcing the error and making things worse.

16. One more for the road!

Once you've completed your practice session, go back to the beginning of the piece and play it straight through. Relax, and just enjoy playing the music. The tricky parts will sound better and you'll feel like you've really achieved something.

17. Enjoy the added extras.

While your "destination" may be to master a specific instrument (and that includes your voice), there are other achievements you will make along the way—possibly without even noticing. Among the goals of practicing are consistency, surpassing obstacles, and developing good habits. These are qualities and skills that will serve you well in life, not just in music. So as you have your head down diligently practising your instrument, remember to look up now and then and appreciate everything else you're learning!

18. Reward yourself.

Make sure you reward yourself along the way. Play pieces just for fun. Buy some sheet music for your favourite songs, splash out on concert tickets for an artist you really admire, buy a DVD of some of your favourite musicians. All of this helps you stay inspired (see Strategy #1!) And besides, you deserve it!

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